

Two mothers abused as children on raising their children

Making a plea for a differentiated approach

Janna and Eva, two married women in their late and early thirties, were physically and sexually abused as children. Nowadays they are both mothers. Janna has two children, a daughter of nine and a son of six. She works as a school counsellor and also deals with child abuse as a professional. Eva is a group leader in an institution for mentally handicapped adults. Her only son is one-and-a-half years old.

This case study is part of a retrospective in-depth study on the long term consequences of physical and sexual abuse, focused on how parents cope with their abusive childhood histories and manage to raise their children. The project aims to provide insight in how intergenerational patterns of violence are transformed and broken and poses a challenge to old concepts of transmission of violence. Furthermore it could be useful for improving prevention and therapy as it may be supportive to parents abused as children. With both women two interviews were held, which lasted between one and a half and three hours. The conversations took place at the beginning of 1994. The motivation of both women to participate was strikingly similar. They complained about the societal invisibility of the aftermath of abuse in adult life and lack of opportunity to speak freely about the meaning of the former abuse to their current life.

Eva was neglected and physically abused by her mother since she was a baby. As a child of six months, dehydration led to a half-year hospital stay. Her mother labelled her as disobedient, hyperactive and nervous. Eva's only sister, three years younger, was not as severely abused and broke contact with her parents for two years when she was a young adult. Eva was more fearful and compliant and tried to negotiate in order to get her sister and

Case Study

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mother back together. Eva typifies her mother as a dominant, aggressive and hysterical woman who only accepts compliant and submissive behaviour. Her mother controlled her to an extreme, especially since adolescence. For example, it was impossible for Eva to have self-chosen friends. Her father sometimes interfered when the abuse got too severe but mostly did not dare to stand up to his wife. At age 15, Eva was sexually abused several times by her boyfriend in her parents' house, at the instigation of her mother, and she reports physical violence in a previous partner relationship. During our interview she recounts that her husband has been emotionally neglected in his family of origin.

Janna is the eldest of four children in her family of origin. She has been physically abused by her father, as were her siblings and her mother. For a few years now Janna has recollected several incidents of her father abusing her sexually. Once he forced her to hold his penis in the bathroom when she was 15; other incidents of fondling happened during 'romping-games'. She describes the different faces of her father: dominant and authoritarian within the family; respected, communicative and open-minded outside. The picture of her mother is rather obscure; in her experience she could never count on her support or protection. Although her mother was never seriously ill, her weak health was often used as an argument to spare her. Janna always felt very responsible for the well-being of the family members. She tried to protect her siblings during fights, negotiated in the quarrels between her parents and became the family-mediator. She considers herself still as one who tries to communicate when conflicts between family members arise. At the age of 23 she went to Israel for 11 years. In this period one of her sisters broke contact with their parents. Janna later told her siblings, though never her mother, about the abuse and confronted her father three years ago. He denied and did not 'remember' the incidents of sexual abuse his daughter mentioned.

In our interviews the women stress not giving up very easily, although Eva thought often about suicide during her early twenties. They work hard, both are very intuitive and compassionate in their work and show refined communication skills during the interviews. In this sense they can be considered fighters and adaptors. Janna was able to learn Hebrew in several months and Eva stuck to the importance of finding suitable help. But they also express vulnerabilities. Both women think that only perfect is good enough. They feel guilty very easily. Janna, for example, does not permit herself to be ill. If she is not working hard, she loses her feeling of being a competent person. Eva feels herself to be less than others very quickly, her self-esteem is still fragile and she needs affirmation to feel more safe. Especially this seems to be problematic in contact with women. She still longs for a real female friend but has been disappointed many

times. She links the experience to the fact that she was abused by a woman.

Janna and Eva both mention having a supportive partner who is aware of their history of abuse and with whom they share the care-taking tasks of the children. But this does not mean that the relationships are not problematic. Janna recounts periodical sexual difficulties in the relationship with her husband, especially on when and how to have sex. She criticizes her husband for not being consistent enough towards the children in everyday rearing-practices. Eva reports that her husband often gives too radical solutions for her problems with her family of origin and that she has to explain a lot to him about the developmental phases of their child. She encourages her husband to seek help for his own childhood neglect. Both women complain about the emotional reactions of their partners towards their family of origin, especially their aggressive feelings towards the offender, which sometimes leaves too little room for their own process of working-through and is felt to be counter-productive. The partner can use the traumatic past as a container through which problems and difficulties with other backgrounds are covered and disguised.

Both women tell spontaneously that they were determined to raise their children in a different and more democratic way. 'No fighting in my house!' They both stress the fact that children do have the right to express their feelings and their opinion and that home needs to be a safe, loving and sheltered place for them. Both of them find it of vital importance to communicate with their children and to listen to them carefully. Janna tells how she is dealing with feelings that her daughter is claiming her sometimes and oversteps her limits: she sends her to her room when she is getting very angry or too upset. But afterwards she always tries to communicate about these incidents with her daughter. Eva's child is still very young. She expresses thoughts about care, attention and setting clear boundaries for the child. She rejects physical punishment. The mothers seem to be very aware of the vulnerability of their children. Janna is very alert in situations in which males (also her brother and her husband) play 'romping-games' with the children, which reminds her of her own abuse in the past. Following an incident in which a nephew was fondling her son, she talked with her son about his right to say 'no' and encouraged him to tell his parents if someone touches his body against his will. Eva expresses the desire to communicate with other mothers abused as children and does not leave her child alone with her mother, or mother-in-law. Through observing her son's healthy,

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sensitive and active behaviour and development she has come to view the stigma her mother gave her differently.

Janna and Eva have also spoken of changes in their process of working-through and the way they are setting boundaries. The two women have sought therapy several times, which has supported them in showing more assertive behaviour. Janna went to Israel for 11 years despite her feelings of guilt. After her last but one therapy she decided that her children would not stay overnight anymore in her parents' house. Recently she confronted a conflict situation at her workplace instead of being compliant. Eva, who still feels very controlled by her mother and by her parents-in-law, is setting limits to the frequency and self-evidence of visits and telephone calls. She decided to express more directly what she thinks and feels, but is also struggling with the negative responses of others. In this respect she has found that having a child enables her to take a more assertive stand against the emotional demands of her family of origin.

Implications for parents

Sweeping statements like 'as the tree so the fruit' can lead to stigmatization of adults who have been abused as children. Insinuations and prejudices have kept them silenced and increased their feelings of incompetence, of impending fate, and underlined their lack of faith in being a good-enough parent. In these two narratives the subjects' need for solidarity and expressing the aftermath of their abusive childhood-histories was shown very clearly. It is an important step forward for them to speak about their abuse in childhood and its consequences instead of being silenced. In this sense, speaking up can be viewed as validation, a longing for sharing and support and also as a way to empower oneself. It implies that more openness and information about the solutions and working-through processes of other parents could also contribute to empowerment and the process of recovery.

Secondly, both interviewed mothers, abused as children, lacked appropriate parenting role models in their family of origin. Their childhood experiences have led to low expectations of others and strengthened their anticipating qualities. Janna decided as a child that you can only count on yourself. Eva has difficulties finding real friends. When people are nice to her she often has the feeling they want something from her, such as sexual favours. It is remarkable that both mothers, Janna more obviously than Eva, have a

negotiating and mediating position within the family. They tried to compromise while some of their siblings broke contact with their parents for a while, were more rebellious and came more openly into conflict. They feel quite responsible for the well-being of the family and sense the feelings of others professionally and personally. This has led to a disregard for their own feelings and needs, and may continue into a one-way pattern in different adult relationships, in which they are giving more and taking less.

Thirdly, their life-histories illustrate the importance of protective forces which can buffer against the deteriorating effects of abuse. There is empirical evidence that a supportive partner-relationship and friendships are protective factors, as are accomplishment in work, economic security and the development of special talents or skills. Another buffer is rejection of the values of the abusing parent, regaining insight into what has happened and personal therapy. Access to social networks, responsiveness and flexibility towards the children, a sense of hope and awareness about their own rearing-values are also protective. All these compensating outcomes improve, directly or indirectly, the quality of parenting, although it is still unclear which underlying mechanisms and processes increase protective outcomes. In considering the rearing of their children, both mothers are eager to give their children what they themselves have missed in their family of origin. Violent, authoritarian, controlling and inattentive behaviour are transformed into listening, understanding and taking their children seriously.

Furthermore, these cases show that working-through is an ongoing process: memories, meanings and experiences are activated in different individuals and at different developmental stages of both the adult and the child. Probably such changes trigger new processes of working-through. Survival of childhood histories of abuse can be viewed as a multi-dimensional struggle to overcome the abuse and its consequences: in this sense, adults abused as children can still be victims in some aspects and survivors in others within the same period of time (Sanford, 1990).

Implications for professionals

Theories on intergenerational transmission of violence have mainly focused on repetition of violence into the next generation. Although patterns of violence can be transmitted across generations it is my opinion that a simple dichotomic approach (repetition or breaking the cycle of violence) does

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not give us more differentiated insight into the ways in which the majority of subjects abused as children are coping with the childhood trauma and how they raise their children. According to the Kaufman en Zigler (1987) review, two-thirds of parents abused as children overcome this intergenerational cycle of abuse. Understanding how this pattern is so frequently broken, and what differentiates this group from those who repeat their history of violence into the next generation, is therefore necessary and important. Whilst research has been emphasizing continuity of family violence across generations, transformation, change and intergenerational breaks in the patterns of violence have been underestimated and undervalued. Unfortunately, as a consequence, there is still scarcely more process-orientated research available on the differential pathways in which parents, abused as children, try to deal with the consequences, the changing meaning of their traumatic past and the upbringing of their children.

Theoretically speaking, the process-orientated trauma-theory could be a promising theoretical framework for intergenerational questions: it focuses on individual variety and on transformations due to time and individual development. Long-term effects of trauma are not only influenced by the nature and gravity of the traumatic experiences, but also by how individuals have subjectively experienced the trauma, the different ways in which they have coped with it and the meaning they have attached to it. The recollection of what has happened is coloured by these given meanings: in this sense there is an ongoing dynamic process of mutual influence in which the past, the present and expectations of the future are altered and directed. From this point of view, developmental triggers, like having a child and changing demands at work, can be considered as challenges to be overcome, and show the necessity of creating a shifting meaning throughout specific developmental-phases and experiences in adulthood. Triggers can be viewed as ticking time-bombs but also as second chances and possibilities for working-through certain aspects of the trauma.

On the other hand the trauma-theory fails to explain the meaning of gender in the way patterns of violence are transmitted and transformed. A feminist point of view on power, gender and violence seems called for. More detailed information is needed on what ways gender is playing a role in raising children for parents abused as children. How are assumptions and expectations on childrearing gendered in daily practice and expressed in parenting attitudes and behaviour? What is the meaning of the fact that Eva has to

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explain to her husband the developmental phases of their child, and that Janna pleads for more consistent paternal behaviour towards the children? This implies that information from both mothers and fathers abused as children is necessary and that the relationship with the partner, as it is such an important source of both support and stress, needs to be explored more in depth. These women-survivors were active in seeking help, but what happened meanwhile with their husbands and their relationships? How to interpret the fact that Eva tries to motivate her child-neglected husband to seek help? Thirdly, the meaning of gender of both victim and offender, and the relationship with the offender, may be promising key-notions considering some specific long-term consequences of abuse (Gordon, 1990). This is illustrated by Eva's difficulties in finding trustworthy female friends, and it is Janna's implicit opinion that only males are sexual offenders.

It seems necessary to not only take outcomes like transmission or breaking the cycle of abuse into account, but to focus on a broader process-orientated perspective of the variety of possibilities open to survivors of childhood abuse.

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